

What has made you feel proud?

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“Pride”

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They felt betrayed. They were angry. They felt ill-used. They were ill-used. They sought redress because their loyalty, patriotism, and self-denial seemed to be ignored by Congress. It had been eighteen months since Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown. The Treaty of Paris was six months away. These Continental soldiers remained encamped at Newburgh, New York, unpaid, hungry, exasperated. Their families back home continued enduring hardship.

They did concede how some signers of the Declaration of Independence weren't “summer patriots.” Some still serving the cause of American independence suffered too, having pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor. Contrary to popular fiction, however, only a small minority sacrificed as severely as the soldiers. Jefferson certainly enjoyed his Revolutionary War sipping wine in France.

They just never reckoned that this victorious nation would be broke.

March 15, 1783, in Newburgh, was George Washington's finest moment. It certainly was a decisive moment in our nation's history. Washington appealed to their nobler pride.

What a testimony today of leadership and character, 240 years and one day since Washington's Newburgh speech. Washington's words and commitment can cure us of preening, tin-pot, me-before-all self-pride, today's spiteful lust to be served rather than serve, this helium bloated hubris malignantly cancerous to our republic. Where's self-respect, self-denial? Look around. Do we cheat our sons and daughters of noble and honest pride? Have we helped them to value duty and achieve pride in themselves? Do we deny them the gift of hardship? What has made you feel proud? What would our kids answer if we asked them what makes them feel pride in themselves? Can pride be given, or must it be merited? Are we hot-house flowers or trees strengthened because we're buffeted by the discomfort of wind and storm? The sin of easy. Will they have pride in belonging to something larger, a pride that follows accomplishing something worthwhile because it's hard to do? How do you sharpen flint?

The officers of his Continental Army had gathered to plot far worse than mutiny. They schemed the shameful selfishness of retribution. Petitions of grievances had been signed, sent, ignored. Fiery talk rallied them toward a military take-over of the government, installing Washington as Emperor. If Roman Generals and Legions could cross the Rubicon and force Rome's Senate to yield and crown Julius their Caesar, they too could declare the republic dead and induce Washington to rule. Who could turn down such power? Who? Washington. This immoral descent into dictatorship, Washington grieved, was freedom's true betrayal and prove the British correct, that democracy is a futile conceit, that this bold American cause would be proven a predictable failure, given base, conformist, human nature.

On March 15, Washington came to one of their meetings. He counted on his officers' military pride. Would they remain men of honor? Toward the end of his speech, he made this appeal: “Let me entreat you, Gentlemen ... not to take any measures, which, viewed in the calm light of reason, will lessen the dignity, and sully the glory you have hitherto maintained—let me request you to rely on the plighted faith of your Country, and place a full confidence in the purity of the intentions of Congress ... they will

adopt the most effectual measures in their power, to render ample justice to you, for your faithful and meritorious Services. And let me conjure you, in the name of our common Country—as you value your own sacred honor—as you respect the rights of humanity, and as you regard the Military and national character of America, to express your utmost horror and detestation of the Man who wishes, under any specious pretences, to overturn the liberties of our Country, and who wickedly attempts to open the flood Gates of Civil discord, and deluge our rising Empire in Blood.”

A humble gesture during the speech became the stuff of legend. He pulled from his pocket his spectacles and put them on. Very few staff officers, such as Hamilton, had seen him wear them. He apologized to his men: “Gentlemen, you will permit me to put on my spectacles, for, I have grown not only gray, but almost blind in the service of my country.”

Loyalty always is personal, when loyalty is deserved. His officers remained in service to him, to their country, to the cause for which they had striven and sacrificed so much. Again, they chose self-denial and humility. Again, they chose honor. Again, they chose pride. Again, they earned our republic its chance.